COMMENTARY

How can work from home support neurodiversity and inclusion?

Hanna Kalmanovich-Cohen* and Steven J. Stanton

Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA
*Corresponding author: Email: hkcohen@oakland.edu

Working from home may be a potential pathway forward that confers a multitude of positive outcomes in terms of building organizational neurodiversity. Working from home (aka remote work or telework) has increased in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sytch & Greer, 2020). This work-from-home expansion has revealed many upsides to this shift in work modality for millions around the globe. Some benefits at the employee level include increased schedule flexibility, increased job satisfaction, reduced commutes, and reduced stress and work–family conflict (Allen et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen, 2015). However, these findings have centered on neurotypical populations. What was perhaps unforeseen is that working from home also has the potential to be a boon for neuroatypical employees (e.g., those with autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, etc.) and organizations as well.

It is important to discuss how and why the benefits of working from home may be different for neuroatypical compared to neurotypical employees. For example, as highlighted by LeFevre-Levy and colleagues (2023), at the level of the employee, neuroatypical individuals may struggle in conventional in-person work environments for reasons that stem from cognitive differences, such as challenges focusing due to sensory concerns. Such sensory concerns for neuroatypical individuals like lighting or odors may not be distractions or even noticeable to neurotypical workers (Weber et al., 2022). Access to work from home as an option provides a pathway for such an employee to create an environment that allows them to flourish in the absence of distraction. At the level of the organization, providing work from home access can help organizations facilitate performance maximization from both neuroatypical and neurotypical employees. In addition, there is value in incorporating neurodiversity as an important element of diversity, equity, and inclusion goals of the organization (Ott et al., 2022).

Herein, we will touch on several specific ways that working from home can potentially address current challenges for both the employee and the organization with regard to building and benefitting from organizational neurodiversity. It is worth noting that to achieve the benefits of work from home, one must first recruit and select neurodiverse employees. The hiring process itself poses a challenge for several neuroatypical individuals (Sarrett, 2017). But successful recruitment and selection processes can potentially lead to greater retention when work from home options are more readily available. To achieve the maximum benefits of working from home, there also needs to be a shift in focus from the medical model that centers on the diagnosis of disorders (e.g., autism) and the required accommodations toward a social model of neurodiversity with a focus on interindividual variability in traits and their potential benefits rather than solely focusing on the associated challenges (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023).

Table 1. Linking Neurodiversity and Work From Home Benefits

Neurodiversity traits/characteristics	Medical diagnoses			Work from home benefits			
	Autism	ADHD	Dyslexia	Schedule flexibility	Reduced distractions	Controllable environment	Communication preferences
Problems with social interactions	x	x			x		x
Sensory issues	x	x			x	x	
Impulsivity	x	x		x			x
Sleep disorders	x	x		x			x
Fixated interests	x	x		x	x	x	
Engaging in repetitive behaviors	x	x		x	x		x
Creative thinking		x	x	x			x
Concentration issues		x	x	x	x		
Strong attention to detail	x				x		
Strong memory	x				x		
Ability to multitask		x			x	x	
Hyperactivity (physical and/or mental)		x		x		x	x
Reading/spelling difficulties			x	x		x	x
Difficulty with sequential processing			x		x	x	
Holistic information processing			x			x	

Focus on individuals' traits rather than diagnosis

Neuroatypical individuals process information and interact with their environment in ways that are different from some neurotypical individuals (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). For example, individual traits such as procrastination tendencies, difficulty paying attention, or managing time are associated with ADHD (Brown, 2005). Yet, these same traits can also be found among some neurotypical individuals but perhaps are not severe enough to merit diagnosis. Because all employees have a range of challenges, both diagnosed and undiagnosed as medical conditions, we believe that organizations should not solely categorize individuals based on medical terms that are commonly described as deficits. Additionally, not all individuals have equal access to medical diagnoses of cognitive differences (Kapp et al., 2013). Instead, organizations should treat neurological differences as naturally occurring variations (Armstrong, 2011; Singer, 2017). By focusing on the different traits and characteristics individuals bring to the workplace, organizations can help these individuals to overcome their challenges and better utilize their unique capabilities to effectively perform their jobs (see Table 1 for summary).

Many of these employees may benefit from minor changes to their work environment, such as flexibility in their daily schedule, reduced distractions, control over their working environment, or certain modes of communication with coworkers and managers. By providing more flexibility, working from home can promote a sense of autonomy and control (Allen et al., 2015), as individuals may choose where and when to perform their duties. Additionally, by promoting asynchronous working hours, organizations can help individuals who might struggle with sleep-related issues and thus might be more productive at night (Boland et al., 2020). A more flexible work environment allows employees to attend to their individual needs as they arise.

Working from home can also alleviate some common distractions of the office environment. This will be helpful for employees who might struggle with social interactions or have difficulty concentrating. When employees work from home, they have more control over when and how to respond to coworkers by being able to temporarily mute chat or email notifications and set clear

boundaries around when interruptions are appropriate (Liu, 2022). This can be especially beneficial for individuals with creative thinking abilities, as controlling interruptions might foster a more creative thought process (Burleson, 2005).

By allowing employees to control their work environment by working from home, organizations can help employees to create the most effective working environment for them. For example, some individuals might benefit from taking a break during certain tasks or prefer a certain type of environment with no harsh lighting or noises (Weber et al., 2022). This will not only help individuals with sensory issues but also can lead to an increase in productivity, as each individual will perform in his or her most effective setting. Last, employees with writing or spelling difficulties might benefit from a quiet working environment and have greater access to technology while working from home, such as screen readers or recordings of important meetings.

Availability of different modes of communication can also be beneficial for employees who choose to work from home. Because communication among remote workers tends to be more formal and less spontaneous than in the office (Waizenegger et al., 2020), these employees who feel overwhelmed by unpredictable social interactions can find other ways to communicate. For instance, individuals who might struggle with direct eye contact might benefit by virtual communication that relies less heavily on visual cues, such as virtual meetings without video. Additionally, virtual meetings can be recorded, provide closed captions, and also allow note taking for individuals who might need to refer back to the information discussed during the meeting. By promoting these adjustments to the working environment, companies can retain more employees and further accommodate the needs of all workers when it comes to communication preferences.

We believe that organizations should promote work from home opportunities while focusing on meeting the unique needs of individuals. By embracing the fact that all employees have different strengths and challenges, organizations can identify ways to successfully support both neuroatypical and neurotypical employees, some of whom might choose to work from home. This approach will allow individuals to receive tailored accommodations that can help them deal with their unique challenges.

Potentially avoiding the need for disclosure

Because neuroatypicality is not always discernible by physical presentation, one issue raised by LeFevre-Levy and colleagues (2023) centers around disclosure—meaning when and if an employee or potential candidate chooses to inform the organization of their neurodiverse identity (Bewley & George, 2016). In many cases, this becomes a burden for the employee to then make a risk–benefit calculation as to whether or not to disclose. Once a disability is disclosed, then accommodations are often required in many developed countries, but disclosure (and accommodations) can be accompanied by unintended consequences, like stigma toward the employee (Bewley & George, 2016).

What if disclosure and the risk of negative outcomes associated with disclosure could be avoided? If employees are given greater agency in making choices regarding work from home, then they can self-select into a work environment that itself is an accommodation. The key is that they can choose to avoid disclosure and the potential stigma that it can bring. One caveat of this approach could be the possibility that work from home becomes a proxy for neuroatypicality, meaning that only neuroatypical employees choose to work from home; thus, anyone making that choice is neuroatypical. Yet, as organizations continue to adjust postpandemic, it is clear that very large portions of the workforce prefer fully remote or hybrid remote environments at rates that far exceed the neuroatypical population (Sytch & Greer, 2020). This reality means that choosing to work from home should rarely involve risking proxy disclosure of neuroatypicality. One other potential concern about this approach is that neuroatypical individuals may still harbor negative self-esteem that stems from the "hiding" of their real selves, as has been noted in sexual minority

groups for example (Pachankis, 2007). In addition, the potential to create community within an organization that brings together neuroatypical individuals into support groups—a practice that is growing in large firms (Austin & Pisano, 2017)—can only be realized if employees disclose their neuroatypicality. In spite of these concerns, the option to work from home gives employees more agency and choice. In general, that alone has the potential for the positive outcomes noted.

Avenues for future research linking neurodiversity and work from home

As noted by LeFevre-Levy and colleagues, research in the domain of neurodiversity is presently lacking; this is true to a greater extent if work from home is considered. For example, as noted earlier, neurodiverse employees who work from home can choose their preferred communication mode. Potential future research could focus on when neuroatypical individuals can choose to use email or instant messaging (rather than video or other synchronous modes of communication) and how this choice can potentially lead to improved outcomes, such as a reduction in job stress, higher levels of engagement, and greater productivity for the organization. Additionally, it may be worth exploring other issues in mental health, such as anxiety or depression (Barclay & Markel, 2009), as individuals affected by these issues might also benefit from work from home opportunities. By integrating the existing findings around neurotypical employees with future research that also utilizes neuroatypical individuals, organizations can start envisioning the future neurodiverse workforce through a lens of both neuroatypical and neurotypical individuals.

Benefits at the level of employees, organizations, and society

In conclusion, there are benefits at all levels to be gained from increased work from home opportunities with regard to neurodiversity. By working from home, neuroatypical employees can create work environments that allow them to avoid social elements or sensory concerns that hinder their performance (Weber et al., 2022). Organizations can increase their neurodiversity through more successful recruiting procedures and also optimize performance from their existing employees by utilizing work from home opportunities. At the level of society, greater inclusion via work from home of neuroatypical individuals into the workforce can reduce the overwhelming levels of unemployment faced by these individuals (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023).

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